

PRIVATE WENSDAY

By HENRY NORMANBY.

Will readers of this story tell us whether they think the brother ought to have been shot, and what are their reasons for or against? The ending is so gruesome that we are bound to inform those who have read Henry Normanby's first three stories that others are coming along from the same pen which, whilst equally clever, have happier terminations.

THE line broke in half a dozen places and half a dozen men stepped forward from the rank behind, but, before the gaps were filled, Private Wensday turned eyes right to see if his brother yet stood, and, meeting his sidelong glance, went manfully on with his murderous task. Again the line was broken and a dozen men fell, and again the rear closed up; the rebels were using their large guns.

As the noise grew louder, the smoke denser, and the dust thicker, the lieutenant rode down the line, red with excitement, recklessly passing along the whole range. His horse jumped and shied as the shots struck and tore up the earth all round, but he spurred the animal on to where the colours waved bravely in the tumult.

"They are running away, blast them! At the rear, sergeant," he said.

Sergeant Kegan echoed his chief as he came to "Attention."—"Are they, sorr? Blast them!"

The supreme indifference of the two men, their formal attitude, and their disregard for their own safety in that hot region of sudden death were things to please Private Wensday, whose quick eyes, glancing to left this time, noted every movement of his officers.

"If you've two men you can trust——" began the lieutenant.

"I have one, sorr, and meself," answered the sergeant, and every man that heard the words felt uplifted.

"Then set yourselves at opposite corners of the square and shoot every dog that runs!"

The sergeant walked unscathed to where Private Wensday, with another glance at his brother, three men along, still stood mechanically loading and firing. The primary intense excitement of the fight had worn off; two hours ago his heart beat panifully, his temples throbbed, his breath came quickly, and his legs trembled beneath him; now he had

fallen into the routine and orderly disorder of this and a dozen similar fights, his hot hands were steady, his smoke and dust-begrimed face showed no emotion, but the lines round his parched mouth and the wet patches under his eyes told of his weariness; still he held himself erect and worked with unflagging regularity—a veritable slaying-machine.

On every side the drawn lips and heavy eyes set forth the general weariness, yet no one made complaint. As each gap occurred a living man unhesitatingly stepped into it, and every minute the square grew smaller.

As the man next to him pitched forward Private Wensday closed into his place, his eyes travelling right again to see if his brother still lived. Reassured, he turned his attention to the carnage around him, fired, opened his rifle, cleared the breech, loaded, and fired again. A bullet sang past him, and the man behind fell forward against his legs. Private Wensday moved ahead half a foot, and stood before the sergeant.

"Fall out," said he, and the private, obeying the order, followed the sergeant to the back of the square. He was elated at being so chosen, and although his limbs ached as he walked (for he had stood almost in one position for over two hours) and the joints of his knees were stiffly set, he took no note of it in his pride and satisfaction. He lay down, half hidden by a line of trampled currant-bushes, and watched the moving, reeking mass of men thirty yards away.

On a low stone trough, near the other corner of the square, sat Sergeant Kegan, alert and anxious. The mass swept on, grew broader, shrank, the men closed up, and the square became smaller; then, with the booming of the cannon from beyond the road, and the shrieks and groans of dying men and horses, back came the swaying mass, hurried and uneven, a good ten yards or so. Pressed forward again, and apart, closed, and was borne backward, like some grim minuet danced to the music of thunder and lamentation.

Private Wensday, resting on the trampled earth, watched the conflict with a feeling akin to contentment. One thing only disturbed his peace—he was deeply anxious with regard to his brother. They had each been in action many times, but never together until this day. His brother was a few years younger than himself, and they had never quarrelled nor had a misword. The younger brother had been the constant charge of the elder, and their mother thanked God that such sons were hers. While they stood and fought together, each sharing the common danger, sustaining each other with the glance of an eye, it seemed less perilous; there was even a sense of security in their companionship. But now that they were separated, now that he could see neither where his brother was nor what he was doing, Private Wensday was greatly disquieted.

Still the square grew smaller as it swept to and fro, and at length, as it fell back from a terrific onslaught of the enemy, two men broke from the line and tore madly away from their fellows, away to the road, away to liberty—to life! Private Wensday shot one as he rushed on, and the sergeant, from his corner near the stone trough, brained the other with the butt of his musket. They came often then, for the fighting was at close quarters, within a few feet of each other, and the bullets nipped and

whistled and bayonets flashed and darted, while the separating pile of bodies grew higher. The rebels were right upon the little square, climbing the barrier of flesh, fighting magnificently sword in hand. The heavy firing had ceased, and as the deep booming died away the shrieks of fear and pain and the cries of anger rose sharp and clear.

Private Wensley stood up, watching the seething, writhing mass and waiting with a grim determination for those whose fear proved stronger than their sense of duty. As the enemy stormed in upon them they broke away by ones and twos and threes and made for the road. Some, seeing the private and sergeant waiting, turned and sneaked back into the mass; others rushed on and were shot down; whilst, now and again, a man escaped. The coward-curers were doing their work so diligently that the yard between the stone trough, set by an overturned wall, and the green meadow through which ran a stream, was getting well filled with their successful cases. The sergeant noted that his own tent-mate lay prone on the stony earth. A couple more ran through the wide space and fell. Private Wensley loaded quickly, for the sergeant was clubbing a half-mad creature who thought it well to live, and behind the stone trough another man was creeping and crouching. His hunched back rose over the edge and disappeared; the wall stones made uneven walking, but behind the trough he paused and straightened his back, while Private Wensley, with ready hand, waited only to sight the space between his eyes. The man faced him, and he saw his mark, but did not shoot, for the craven creature stumbling terrified behind the trough was his brother.

The sergeant had brained his man and was running toward the meadow where a little straggling band of deserters sought refuge. Rifle in hand he chased them back to the square, which had now grown terribly small, cursing them the while right martially. Private Wensley had time to note these things while the man he had to shoot, yet did not, took another faltering step amongst the great uneven stones of the dry-set wall, stumbling as they turned unexpectedly, bruising his feet and twisting his ankles. He caught at the edge of the trough to support himself, and again his face came round, and again Private Wensley did not shoot.

Another man, hatless, dishevelled, a black patch of blood and dirt showing on his bare chest, ran wildly, with staggering gait, across the wide yard and escaped, to die presently of his wound. Private Wensley was looking at his brother; he found the space between his eyes with his sight and followed it across the wall and into the road, which was strewn with discarded rifles, knapsacks, ammunition-belts, and miscellaneous baggage. In half a minute he would be on level ground, and out of range. If only he had used his last cartridge, thought the private; and, following on that came the face of his mother waiting for the return of her sons. It passed, and the curtain of the years lifted, and he and his brother were at sea together in peril of shipwreck. Oh, those eternal seconds! Out of the panorama of the past stood another picture—two boys blackberrying in the fields at home. It also passed, and the present was with him. He did not consider, nor wonder, nor feel grief or shame—he simply knew that a deserter was escaping, would in a few seconds be out of range, free to

return home unharmed. Again a terror-stricken man ran straight down from the ranks, avoiding the sergeant, covering the space between the rampled potato patch and the wretched yard in a few strides, rushing straight down the way with noise of pounding feet and whistling breath.

It seemed to Private Wensday that of the two recreants he who ran boldly and took all risks was the worthier to escape. He fired, and shot himself brotherless.

The pounding feet and whistling breath died away down the encumbered road, and Private Wensday loaded again with suicidal intent. At that moment he saw the sergeant struck down, and his face laid open by an escaping man. It was no time for egotism, the private reckoned with the deserter, and then with a terrible cry rushed ahead shouting to the men to follow him. With a courage born of desperation the square broke and sprang forward at the "Charge!" The private led them like one demented. Throwing away his rifle and brandishing a sword he made straight for the oncoming enemy; for a moment he appeared to be swallowed up, but his comrades storming behind saw him engaged with a dozen men at once. The lieutenant reached his side, followed instantly by the remainder of the intrepid band. It was the decisive moment. The enemy turned and fled.

The commanding officer smiled on Private Wensday, and spoke of medals, hinted at the V.C., mentioned promotion, duty, country, King, and honour and a brilliant future; furthermore, he shook him by the hand.

The private stepped back two paces and saluted; then, drawing his revolver from his belt, he placed it to his temple, fired, and fell dead.



TOO POLITE FOR ANYTHING.

He was such a pleasant fellow,
So polite, so polished too;
Everywhere we went together,
He would murmur, "After you!"

Did we reach a door together,
He would never first go through,
But would wait to let me pass him,
Saying softly, "After you!"

Was there anything we wanted,
And was not enough for two.
He would always let me have it,
Always muttered, "After you!"

Now he's rushed me for a tenner,
And my hopes are flickering dim,
For he has not since been heard of,
And I now am "after him."